

A Sheep's Eye View sermon series
#5 – In the House of the Lord
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Well, we've made it. During this sermon series, we've journeyed with our tour guide sheep from the safety and security of the ranch, through the valleys and up the mountains to the lush green tablelands for feeding, and back down again into the safety of the ranch. In a sense, this last verse is about coming home.

But it's also about who or what accompanies us on the journey. A sheep that lives under the care of the Good Shepherd does not journey through life alone, but is followed by the goodness and mercy of the shepherd. In fact, this whole psalm has been a testament to the kind of care provided by an attentive shepherd, which is characterized by the presence of goodness and mercy in the life of the sheep.

I like the way the Bible translation The Message puts the first part of this verse: "Your beauty and love chase me every day of my life." There's something appealing about the thought of being pursued, isn't there? There's something affirming about the idea that someone cares about me so much they will chase after me.

Molly and I were in the checkout line of Super Target last week (our home away from home). While I was paying, Molly was playing with a yo-yo she found on display. When I said, "C'mon, Molly, it's time to go," she gave me this evil little grin and just took off running back into the store. Oi vey! So I left the cart and took off after her, trying to scream at her in as nice a tone as possible. And of course, she giggled as she headed right into the women's underwear section. So I'm pushing past lingerie and brassieres and ladies who were calling Super Target Security until I finally got to Molly. I didn't buy her the yo-yo.

Now, when she took off, I could have said, "There she goes. Oh well. At least we've got Sydney. And we can always adopt a dog." Tempting, but of course I wouldn't do that. My first and only priority became chasing after her. Now, I admit, the words I was muttering under my breath didn't have much to do with goodness and mercy, but I would have chased her as long as it took, no matter where she went or what the consequences were.

Compare that idea at the end of this psalm with the parable Jesus told in our first reading. A shepherd who has a hundred sheep will drop everything if one of those sheep gets lost, and will rejoice when that lost sheep is returned to the flock. God's goodness and mercy chase after us all the days of our lives.

Now, this concept is easy to speak of when life is going well, when we're surrounded and enveloped by God's goodness and mercy. But what about when it's not? What about when God is pursuing us, but the circumstances of our lives seem to show that God hasn't caught us yet. When life is rough and we need more than pious platitudes, can we still find comfort in this statement about the Good Shepherd's care for us?

I know I'm probably the only person who does this, but when life gets bumpy and the grass isn't as green, I have a natural tendency to fear, to worry, to ask "why." I also begin to think that God doesn't know what God is doing. Somehow I get this strange notion in my head that I can survive better on my own than in the care of my shepherd. If

God's goodness and mercy isn't readily apparent, it becomes tempting to forget about it or give up on it. "Where's God in my time of need? Why has God abandoned me?"

Thank goodness God doesn't give up on me as easily as I give up on God. Because we are so limited in our understanding of God (a point we conveniently forget), we may not always comprehend God's management style. We like to think we have the big picture, but only God can see the truly big picture. Goodness and mercy to me means that God is able to take the most chaotic, hopeless, discouraging situation, and make something good come out of it. Romans 8 says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love the Lord."

But this concluding verse has another meaning we shouldn't miss. Not only does God pursue us with goodness and mercy, but if we are living lives according to God's plan, then one of the results we will leave behind us is a trail of goodness and mercy. Just like a boat leaves a wake that ripples out behind it, so we leave a wake that ripples out and affects those around us.

Here's the question: What kind of wake are you leaving? Do we leave a trail of beauty and love, or something else? When people think of us, do they think of goodness and mercy, or something less flattering, or do they try not to think of us at all?

In ancient literature, sheep were referred to as "animals with golden hooves" because of their ability to restore desolate fields. No other livestock will eat such a wide variety of foliage, and sheep will easily consume undesirable plants like thistles that can choke a field. Sheep are beneficial for the land, and their presence in a field can mean the restoration of vitality and lushness in a short matter of time.

But you and I both know Christians who don't leave behind restored fields. I know that nobody's perfect, but as Christians, I believe we are called to a higher standard than non-believers. We are called to leave each place a better place than when we found it. A person who worships on Sunday and then criticizes or undermines or spreads negativity throughout the week is not only hurting themselves and those around them, but hurting the very concept of being a Christians. One of the most damaging things we can hear is, "Huh! And she calls herself a Christian!"

In his book on Psalm 23, Phillip Keller says you can tell a lot about what kind of shepherd a person is by looking at their sheep. If they looked well-fed, had thick wool coats, acted confident and content, you know those sheep were in the hands of a competent and caring shepherd. What do people learn about our shepherd from looking at us? Do people see in us the benefits of being under God's control? According to Psalm 23, we should in some way exude the goodness and mercy we have been so graciously given. We should be living a life that leaves behind something of value.

What do we leave behind us? Is it a trail of desolation or restoration? Do we leave behind us life and vitality, or only sighs of relief? Do we ever find ourselves covering our tracks because we are ashamed of what's in our wake? As followers of God, we have a responsibility for the kind of wake we leave. Phillip Keller says in his book about Psalm 23, "The only real, practical measure of my appreciation for the goodness and mercy of God to me is the extent to which I am, in turn, prepared to show goodness and mercy to others."

Only a sheep who strives to live a life of goodness and mercy can offer the concluding phrase: "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." It is fitting, is it not, that the last word of those psalm is "forever." This psalm is often read at funerals and

beside gravesites, and I believe it is primarily because of this last thought. No matter where our journey takes us, if we are under our shepherd's care, we will always be in God's presence.

Now, obviously, this doesn't apply to us physically. Even the best cared-for sheep is going to die at some point, and so will we. I believe what the psalmist is referring to here goes far beyond our physical existence. God not only cares for us in the physical sense, but provides for us in the spiritual sense. We were created as more than just bodies, and will live on as more than just bodies once these mortal vessels have run their course.

Harold Kushner, a Jewish rabbi, says, "My religious experience offers me the assurance that, though my body will one day give out, the essential Me will live on, and if I am concerned with immortality of some sort, I should pay at least as much attention to my soul, my non-physical self, as I do my cholesterol level or my blood pressure."

We have so much medication at our disposal to help us deal with our physical existence, but we can't take a God pill or drink a spiritual renewal liquid or have soul-replacement surgery. The work we are called to do for our essential Me is more subtle and complex, but eternally more rewarding. I wonder how our lives would be different if we matched every hour we spent each week caring for our physical selves with an hour spent caring for our spiritual selves.

So we've come to the end of Psalm 23. I hope you have a greater understanding of these wonderful words, and that you are less reluctant to take on the title of "sheep." As we move closer to Holy Week and the joy of Easter, I pray that this psalm helps us recognize our need for a Good Shepherd in our lives to guide us, protect us, nourish us, and bring us home. The Lord is our Shepherd, thanks be to God.